Ponemah Mills
Main Street
Taftville
New London County
Connecticut

HABS No. CONN-242

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. CONN-242

PONEMAH MILLS

Address: Main Street, Taftville, New London County, Connecticut

Present Owner and Occupant: Ponemah Mills

Present Use: Weaving mill

Brief Statement of Significance: Ponemah Mills, in operation by 1871, was one of the largest textile mills in the United States for many years.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owner: Ponemah Mills is presently (1960) closing back from weaving and manufacturing to simply a weaving mill. Much of the equipment and some of the buildings are for sale.

2. Date of erection: The large original buildings illustrated in this photo-data book, were started in April 1866, and began operation November 16, 1871. Additional mills were built in 1884 and 1902, and the large weave shed in 1910.

3. Important old view: The earliest known photograph of the Ponemah Mills was published as an illustration to the serialized version of John D. Nolan, History of Taftville, Connecticut, "Chapter Three: Start of Ponemah Mills" in the Norwich, Connecticut, Bulletin 1940.

4. Sources of information: Harry Combs, "The Ponemah Mills, Taftville, Connecticut, 1871" (Student paper in office of Prof. Carroll L. V. Meeks, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut [c. 1959]).
John D. Nolan, History of Taftville, Connecticut (Norwich, Connecticut: The Bulletin Press, 1940).

B. Supplemental material: The following is extracted from John D. Nolan, History of Taftville, Connecticut (Norwich: 1940), pp. 6-7:

Taftville is now a manufacturing community, the home of the Ponemah mills and the J. B. Martin Co., Ltd., and its modern history dates from the time that Edward P. Taft of Providence, R. I., bought 600 acres of land on the Shetucket river and

began the construction of the mammoth cotton mills and the village which now bears his name. Of modern manufactories Ponemah mills ranks among the first in New England. In fact, it was authoritatively stated in 1866 that, when finished, it would be the largest cotton mill in the United States. In 1924 it was authoritatively stated the mills have a capacity of 265,000 spindles and 4,000 looms, and mill number one is one of the largest single buildings devoted to the manufacture of cotton now existing in the United States.

Its plan and progress from the purchase of the land water privilege to the completion of the mill and the successful starting of the machinery, occupying a period of about six years, was due to the enterprise of its promoter and first treasurer, Edward P. Taft of the firm of Orray Taft & Co., of Providence R. I. Edward P. Taft graduated from Brown university in 1854, received a mercantile training in his father's office and became a member of the firm in 1858.

After his father's death, he was the firm's financial manager. In October, 1865, he purchased a mill privilege and 600 acres of land lying on both sides of the Shetucket river, four miles above Norwich. There was at this point a fall of about 30 feet, affording ample water power, while the close proximity to the Norwich and Worcester railroad and to tidewater navigation furnished good facilities for the transportation of freight.

The foundation of the first building, 150 long and 75 feet wide, was laid in cement April, 1866. The wheel pit, which is 228 feet long, 61 feet wide and 42 feet deep, was blasted out of solid rock. A dam, completed in 1870, was built across the river out of stone laid in cement, 418 feet long and 24 feet high. Its strength has been fully proved by a pressure of 10 feet depth of water carried on its roll-way.

A charter was obtained June 19, 1867, Edward P. Taft, James S. Atwood, Cyrus Taft and Moses Pierce being the corporators. On the 23rd day of December, 1869, the company was organized as the Orray Taft Manufacturing company, with a capital stock of $1,500,000. Among the subscribers, in addition to the original corporators, were several large capitalists and successful manufacturers: John F. Slater and Lorenzo Blackstone of Norwich, John C. Whitin of Whitinsville, Mass., J. Wiley Edmunds and James L. Little of Boston Mass., William F. Sayles of Pawtucket, R. I., William S. Slater, Earl P. Mason, Truman Beckwith and Samuel Foster of Providence, R. I.

The name of the company was changed to Ponemah mills in 1871. The construction of the buildings and the putting in of the machinery was finished and the mill began operation Nov. 16, 1871. The business of the Ponemah mills for many years steadily expanded.

In 1884 a second mill was built, in 1902 a third mill, and in 1910 the immense weave shed, known as mill No. 4, was constructed. The mills give employment when operating at full capacity to about 1,500 operatives and manufacture several millions of yards of fine cotton goods annually, as well as cotton yarn. They were the first importers and users of Egyptian cotton in the United States, and the first mills in this country to manufacture fine fabrics, which up to that time had been imported from England. The Ponemah mills originated and produces the trade marked cloth soiesette, so well-known by its use for men's shirts and pajamas. They were the first textile mills to be electrically driven by long distance transmission.

The first looms were started in November, 1871, and were operated by Mr. and Mrs. William Hartley and Mary Ann McStay. After the first looms were put into operation in 1871, machinery in other parts of the mill was rapidly installed, and soon the mill was in full operation and overseers were placed in all of the rooms.

John Eccles was engaged as overseer of the weavers and Daniel Russell had charge of the carding room, Mr. Greene had the overseeing of the mule spinners, and Mr. Macomber of the spinning frames. John Blackmar was boss carpenter and Ben Chapman had charge of the painters. Joseph Rose had to oversee the slasher room and Joseph Robinson had charge of the machinists. These men were all well qualified to fill their positions, and the Ponemah mills was for many years considered one of the leading textile mills in the United States.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This is a very large brick building, characteristic of the New England Mills of the late 19th century. It has survived without major alterations.

2. Condition of fabric: Good

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: The main block of the building is five stories high including an attic story, about 80' east-west, x 720' north-south, with two stair towers on the west side continued in open belfries and glazed cupolas to about twice the height of the building. There is a four-story wing toward the river on the east side of the main block.

2. Foundations: Stone.

3. Wall construction: Brick divided into 10' wide bays by slightly projecting pilasters, and with a corbelled brick belt course between the second and third stories.

4. Openings

   a. Doorways and doors: Wide doors at the base of the towers have six panel doors set in deep, brick arched openings.

   b. Windows: The first four floors have double hung windows, 12 light sash over 12 light, very regularly spaced in 10' bays, with segmental heads. Openings have segmental arched brick lintels with slightly projecting labels and projecting stone sills supported by corbeled brick brackets. Double hung attic windows, 8 light sash over 8 light, are spaced 20' on center, and set in dormers with heavily relieved pediments. The attic is also lighted by monitor or clerestory windows in the roof.

7. Roof

   a. Shape, covering: Mansard roof, shingled.

   b. Cornice, eaves: Boxed eave with cyma recta mold over a tall, complex corbeled brick entablature.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Each of the floors is a single open space. The interior, on the first three floors, is typical heavy mill construction with posts spaced 10' on center and beams spanning about 24'. The wood posts are turned and have simple caps, and the beams have chamfered edges. Trusses in the attic span the full width of the building supporting both the roof and the fifth floor thus leaving the fourth floor free of posts.

2. Stairways: Wood, U-shaped stairs are located in the two stair towers on the west of the building. Other stairs are located in the wing.

3. Flooring: Hardwood.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The brick exterior walls have wood wainscot to the window sill level and plaster above.

5. Doors: Heavy, paneled doors.

6. Power: Originally the mill was powered directly from wheels turned by water from the Shetucket River. Later the river was harnessed to generate electricity which is used to run the mill and for the towns of Taftville and Jewett, Connecticut.

7. Lighting: Electric.

8. Heating: Central heating through radiators.

D. Site

1. General setting: The mill is located on low, level ground next to the Shetucket River.

2. Enclosures: The mill property is enclosed by a brick and iron fence.

3. Outbuildings: The mill comprises a large number of structures including a dam, power plant, office building, and several manufacturing buildings.

4. Walks, driveways: Concrete sidewalks and asphalt driveways.

5. Landscaping: Informal landscaping with large open lawns, trees, and shrubs.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect
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